

# SIZA, KOOLHAAS, AND THE OTHERS: Notes on a Research into the Minutia of Architectural Experience

Ana Luísa de Sá  
University of Porto

**Abstract:** Our research delves into the minutia of architectural experience, in a (neuro)phenomenal sense, from an architectural theory standpoint. Phenomenology of architecture and aesthetic theory offered sophisticated empirical definitions and descriptions of architectural experience for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the ineffable dimension of architectural experience is an inevitability, some of its previously inaccessible aspects are now coming to light, as new areas of inquiry tap into and unveil the complexity of our engagement with our surroundings—particularly through neurophenomenology and neuro-aesthetics. Thus, confirmations of previously theorized aspects and further revelations about experience and its components can now be extracted. It is our view that such confirmations and revelations are particularly interesting for architectural theory as an area of scientific inquiry. In our broader research, these are considered adjuvants in our looking for what we designate as evidence of experiential phenomena, and instrumental in further theorizing their underlying components in a way that is methodologically and hermeneutically coherent throughout. A retrospective reading of architectural theory and of architectural authorship and production is proposed in our research—a study of architectural experience in its artifacts. Through such artifacts, we seek to build an interpretive study of architects Álvaro Siza and Rem Koolhaas in their approach to architecture as a lengthy, complex, and meandering exercise, which culminates in a fully accomplished authorial work delivered to *others*, ultimately for their experience. Aspiring to a broader characterization of their authorial methods and resulting architectures, in their particular experiential qualities, we focus our attention on the specificities of two examples: *Museu de Serralves* (1991-1999) by Siza and *Casa da Música* (1999-2005) by Koolhaas/OMA. With this paper, we seek to contextualize some aspects of a larger research.

**Keywords:** Álvaro Siza, Rem Koolhaas, experience, intention, embodiment

## INTRODUCTION

It may very well be that the definition of architecture is as elusive as the definition of (its) experience. The impossibility of an exact definition of one and the other has perhaps something to do with what Steen Eiler Rasmussen (1959) posited as “the correct idea of architecture as something indivisible”. In his *Experiencing Architecture*, the author continues, “Architecture is not produced simply by adding plans and sections to elevations. It is something else and something more. It is impossible to explain precisely what it is—its limits are by no means well-defined” (9).

In 1910, Adolf Loos (2007) had eloquently conveyed a similar idea that “a true building makes no impression as a picture, reduced to two dimensions.” Loos continued, in his particular jest, “It is my great pride that the interiors I have created are completely lacking in effect when photographed; that the people who live in them do not recognize their own apartments from photographs . . . [M]y kind of work *cannot* be represented graphically” (78, original emphasis).

Rasmussen (1959) follows with the adage: art (and assuming the author here means, *therefore*: architecture) “should not be explained; it must be experienced” (9),<sup>1</sup> something that can easily be said of

Loos’s *raumplan* architecture: it’s hard to describe, one has to experience it. It is precisely through the *in situ* experience of architecture that its indivisible nature becomes apparent. Paradoxically, the very means through which this realization is possible also belongs to the realm of the indivisible. Experience, like architecture, is also greater than the sum of its parts.

“[E]mbodiment as lived experience”, as formulated by Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela (1996, 346), is especially applicable to architecture. While inaccessible in its entirety merely through the observation of its parts, that architectural experience may be encompassed by the concept of embodiment is a notion that intrigued and informed our research from the outset, and that there is evidence of architectural experience as a process of embodiment to be found is an intriguing possibility we are exploring, as well. Thus, here, *architectural experience* is meant in the entirety of its embodied nature, in a (neuro)phenomenal sense.

“*L’espace indicible*,” as formulated by Le Corbusier (2000, 25), may not be fully translated and indeed translatable into words, nor the entirety of its processes understood. Nevertheless, while the ineffable dimension of architectural experience is an inevitability, some of

its previously inaccessible aspects are now coming to light, as new areas of inquiry tap into and unveil the complexity of our engagement with our surroundings. Thus, confirmations of previously theorized aspects and further revelations about its components can now be extracted. Once these components become apparent, is it then possible to venture into identifying evidence of architectural experience, similarly to how components of architecture may be considered evidence of a much larger phenomenon?

## 1. CONTEXT OF AN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY RESEARCH ABOUT EXPERIENCE

Recent technological developments, particularly paradigm-shifting for the cognitive sciences and the neurosciences—notably, the advent of fMRI—allow for unprecedented inquiries and understanding of the mechanisms of experience, unveiling progressively its myriad of components.<sup>2</sup> The lines between cognitive science and neuroscience are at times blurred of late. Here, *(the) neuroscience(s)* is used as a general term encompassing both. A distinction should firstly be established between what is here designated simply as *neuroscience of architecture* and *neuroscience for architecture*. That a distinction can be made is at times not clear or indeed acknowledged when dialogues between neuroscience and architecture are concerned, especially outside the focal point of their niche literature. If architecture is considered an object of inquiry and fertile ground for the survey of embodiment through the neurosciences, similarly to how works of art have proven to be particularly important as such, this would be referred to as *neuroscience of architecture*—a line of inquiry we are interested in. *Neuroscience for architecture*, on the other hand, would offer the possibility of establishing operative knowledge with a neuroscientific basis for the achievement of a given experiential result in architecture—a parallel, yet separate, line of inquiry, and one not explored within the scope of our research.<sup>3</sup>

In our research, we delve into minutiae of architectural experience, in a (neuro)phenomenal sense, from an architectural theory standpoint. Phenomenology of architecture and aesthetic theory are of paramount importance, as they offered sophisticated empirical definitions and descriptions of architectural experience in its complexities for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—classic works as *Survival Through Design* by Richard Neutra (1954), *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979) and the aforementioned *Experiencing Architecture* by Rasmussen (1954) regain particular relevance here. Although phenomenology of architecture, may have

been considered as somewhat dated, a newfound interest has emerged as developments in neuroscience now open the possibility of (re)validation, through an intricate combination of philosophical theories and neuroscientific studies, and particularly through the recently founded neurophenomenology (1996) and neuroaesthetics (2002)—as neuroscience tries to find solutions for its *hard problem*,<sup>4</sup> and points exactly in the opposite direction of Cartesian Dualism, in which mental phenomena had been theorized as non-physical. Hence, a number of architecture theorists have directed their attention to what potential may emerge from architecture's encounter with these relatively recent areas of inquiry. *Mind in Architecture* (Robinson and Pallasmaa 2015) and *Architecture and Empathy* (Pallasmaa et al. 2015) are recent publications composed of essays penned by both architects and neuroscientists, proposing exciting discussions on how this potential is already coming, and may further come, to fruition.

*Architecture and Embodiment* by Harry Francis Mallgrave (2013), is a particularly relevant achievement in exploring such potential. An intricate fabric is woven with phenomenology of architecture, aesthetic theory, and neuroscientific findings, to demonstrate the possibility of expanded explanations of experiential phenomena particular to architecture. Furthermore, Mallgrave (2013), architect, historian, and theorist, offers balanced chapters, summoning neuroscientific discoveries in the interpretation of phenomena particular to architectural experience, while arguing the significance of the moment at hand, stating:

The design fields . . . have had more than their share of tangents over the past half century, and designers are rightfully grown weary or distrustful of theory and its extracurricular “-isms.” But something new is distinctly coming into view. We are beginning to understand not only the biological complexity of our embodied natures but also our profound implication with the physical environment at large. All of this should give us pause for reflection. (16)

Mallgrave (2013, 11) states many of aesthetic theory's hypotheses “were remarkably close to what we are learning today” even if “speculative in nature and based on limited psychological knowledge,” indeed, a conclusion the founder of neurophenomenology, Francisco Varela (1996), had previously proposed, and Semir Zeki, founder of neuroaesthetics, recognized as a corollary of his studies (Semir Zeki, *Neuroscientist* 2017). It is precisely in the vis-à-vis between phenomenology of architecture and aesthetic theory with the neurosciences that such conclusions can be reached. This opens the possibility of recognizing when phenomenology of architecture and architectural theory *tout court* have correctly characterized aspects of experience, while additionally making it possible

to identify how architects have similarly intuited this and made it come to fruition through their designs as built works. Zeki's very recent considerations have heightened resonance: "You may be shocked with what I'm about to say: I think artists are neuroscientists, but they know the brain in a different way" (Zeki 2019).

Part of the scope of our research is to highlight that very intuition, demonstrating its embedding in architectural production through evidence we believe is to be found and which we intend to bring forward. From an architectural theory and historiography standpoint, the possibility of a retrospective reading of both architectural theory and architectural production, as a result of the moment at hand, is most enthralling.

Indeed, as demonstrated with *Architecture and Embodiment* (Mallgrave 2013), confirmations and new revelations about the particularities of architectural experience can be extracted through a combination of existing and new areas of scientific inquiry, with the role of phenomenology of architecture and aesthetic theory highly reinforced here, as they established the groundwork through which dialogues between architecture and the neurosciences are now possible. It is our view that these confirmations and revelations are particularly interesting for architectural theory as an area of scientific inquiry. In our research, they are considered adjuvants in our search for evidence of experiential phenomena particular to architecture and instrumental in theorizing their underlying processes and components in a way that is methodologically and hermeneutically coherent throughout. Conversely, we argue that further hypotheses about experience may be theorized, from an architectural theory standpoint, to then be tested by the neurosciences—this is an exercise architects are in a uniquely privileged position to contribute to.

## 2. HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our research is a study, in the field of theory of architecture, about architectural experience in what we consider to be its artifacts—recognizing phenomena of embodiment within the materials particular to architecture. Therefore, *artifact* here designates *evidence of experiential phenomena*, and thus, in a way, evidence of phenomena of embodiment.

While we draw from the works of Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Christian Norberg-Schulz, and others—authors who produced some of the most successful observations on the subject of architectural experience, by theorizing and illustrating experiential effects vis-à-vis architectural settings, usually by means of specific isolated examples—we believe there is much to be found about architectural experience and its complexities within a single architectural production,

from authorial intention to *in situ* fruition. It should also be noted that, our research is not aimed at proposing the replacement of metaphors of expression about experience with new terminologies, but rather to draw from a (neuro)phenomenological understanding of a given component of experience, in order to recognize it within those metaphors. Moreover, a metaphor in itself may compose an artifact.

In our research, a necessary distinction is established between *the others* (non-authors, who experience a given architectural setting) and *the authors* (who propose a given architectural setting, who will experience said architectural setting from an intrinsically different position than that of non-authors)—as there are artifacts that clearly *belong* to the authors while others *belong* to the others. The idea that experience pertains to these two realms, that of *the authors* and that of *the others*, is, indeed, traceable to Álvaro Siza's and Rem Koolhaas's words, and while similar at first glance, nuanced hues about particularities of the architectural métier are detectable. Koolhaas (2012) proposes that "A building has at least two lives—the one imagined by its maker and the life it lives afterward—and they are never the same." While Siza (1992) posits, "Architectural creation is born of an emotion, an emotion urged by a moment and a place. The project, and the construction, demand the authors release themselves from that emotion, in a progressive distancing—conveying it whole and occult. From then on, the emotion belongs to the other(s)" (9).

Once evidence of the authorial intention is unveiled, is it observable as experiential phenomena *in situ*? Conversely, are the experiential phenomena (observed and expressed) traceable to the intention? As a comparative exercise emerges, what further details arise about architecture and (its) experience?

We seek to establish an interpretive study of Álvaro Siza's and Rem Koolhaas's approach to architecture as a lengthy, complex, and meandering exercise, which culminates in a fully accomplished authorial work delivered to others, ultimately, for their experience.

## 3. METHODOLOGY AND OTHER NOTES ABOUT AN ONGOING RESEARCH

Our research is designed to demonstrate the embodied nature of architectural experience in its artifacts. Thus, it is through evidence of experiential phenomena that the construction of our greater object of analysis is built by composing a long section through instances of architectural experience, it is then possible to venture into their expanded characterization and, quite importantly, to bring forward correlations between them.

Aspiring to a broader characterization of the authors' methods and resulting architectures, we are

focusing our attention on two examples, both in the city of Porto. *Museu de Serralves* (1991-1999) by Álvaro Siza, a museum of contemporary art within the grounds of an art deco house with a large gated park, and *Casa da Música* (1999-2005) by Rem Koolhaas/OMA, a concert hall in a consolidated area of the city, in what was once (and is now again) considered the second city center of Porto. These two cultural institutions played their role in what has been described as Porto's recent renaissance, helping revitalize a once rich and then dwindling local cultural scene (as it was in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), with visible gravitational pull on a wider public, both local and international.

The demonstration of our hypothesis is built through the collection and analysis of a combination of materials, specifically directed at unearthing artifacts of embodiment as our navigational compass: by a retrospective reading of authorial materials, i.e. published materials and archival materials (some of which never before published), by collating a selection of existing materials, and by the structured collection of new *in situ* materials. The resulting greater object and ensuing analysis differ from previous studies in their *raison d'être*, in our particular considerations about these buildings, about these authors, and in a broader sense, about architectural experience.

The authors' archives are of paramount importance for our research. Architects make use of specific speculative models as methods of anticipation as they engage in rehearsals and simulations of a design later to become built architecture. We posit this prospective and speculative process results both from and in an *intention*. Regardless of whether this intention is consciously or not embedded in their designs, great architects propose, in effect, architectural settings for experience, honed and curated by a complex and painstaking articulation of architectural solutions with a programmatic problem. This is in line with what Le Corbusier (2000) suggested in 1945: that *ineffable space* is manifested as a result of the "efficiency of the [artist's] intentions whether consciously controlled or not."<sup>5</sup> In his signature grandiose style, Le Corbusier continues, "[S]eized or elusive, these intentions nevertheless exist and are rooted in intuition, that miraculous catalyst of acquired wisdoms, assimilated, even forgotten. In a completed and successful work there are hidden masses of intentions . . ." (24-25).

Rather than sleek monograph illustrations and expensive display models, we selected not-meant-for-publication materials to inform our inquiry. We argue and demonstrate with selected examples that these are, particularly here, both a vehicle for and a result of the complexities of embodiment, playing a most significant role in shaping the experiential intention embedded

in these projects and successful as such, once their essence was translated into construction drawings and onto built architectural settings.

Similarly, we survey *the others'* experience, though here the first-person account is taken into consideration in a non-systematic manner. "[T]he study of mental phenomena is always that of an experiencing person", considered Varela (1996, 346). Indeed, Varela (1996, 344) championed the "first-person evidence" as fundamentally necessary for neuroscientific inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Varela's championing of the first-person account as necessary for the neuroscientific inquiry, was the transformative proposal that gave origin to neurophenomenology. Several methodologies have derived and evolved from Varela's proposal. It is not yet clear or consensual whether these methodologies—such as the micro-phenomenological interview (Petitmengin 2006; Bitbol, Petitmengin 2017)—will provide the ultimate access to "disciplined first-person accounts", as Varela (1996, 344) intended. We consider both the spontaneous first-person account and semi-conducted interview—methodologies for the collection of narrations of experience not unknown to architectural theory, historiography, and critique. Moreover, artifacts of *in situ* fruition include but are not limited to narrations of experience.

It should be noted that, in the particular case of architectural experience, as considered in our research, the direct observation of an architectural setting and corresponding *in situ* experiential phenomena is as important a means for the identification of artifacts as is the first-person account. The criteria established for methodological orientation behind the choice of examples was set to ensure direct and wide access to observation of *in situ* experiential phenomena, a wide variety of archival material pertaining to the authorial process, and an array of materials about the buildings in the media, and more recently in social media. Therefore, easily accessible and highly documented examples were preferred. Buildings where access to *in situ* occurrences of experience without interference would prove challenging (i.e. private houses) were avoided, as it would render our research too reliant on narrations of experience without the possibility of pairing our direct observation without interference. The selected examples are intrinsically different in their authorial processes, programs, and configurations, while simultaneously similar in their local and international impact, with overlapping sets of visitors and public—characteristics which we consider to be of added value here.

Thus far, as the particularities of the evidence collected are emerging, pivotal moments of a more minute exactitude have been identified within the broader scale of the authorial process, and which have greatly shaped what has been observed *in situ*. These

minutiae will be brought forward as case in point on the correlations between the expected qualities of a given architectural setting embedded in the authorial intention and subsequent *in situ* experience. Additionally,

instances have been found in which purely managerial decisions have thwarted the buildings' full experiential potential—decipherable from the authorial evidence—by bypassing the architects' intentions.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Not a farfetched assumption, as Rasmussen (1959, 10) clearly expresses his position a few paragraphs down: "Architecture is a very special functional art; it confines space so we can dwell in it, creates the framework around our lives" (see endnote 5).
- 2 Unlike MRI, the fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) detects blood flow fluctuations in the brain as a means to identify areas of increased neural activity as indicators of response to stimuli through directed task performance.
- 3 Positive outcomes may emerge from *neuroscience for architecture*, namely in the search for the *salutogenesis* of space and ways for architecture to address health and well-being related predicaments through its spatial and experiential qualities.
- 4 For more on the *hard problem of consciousness* see Francisco Varela (1996) and Kirchhoff, Michael D., and Daniel D. Hutto. 2016. "Never Mind the Gap: Neurophenomenology, Radical Enactivism, and the Hard Problem of Consciousness." Edited by Tom Froese, Sebastjan Vörös, and Alexander Riegler. *Constructivist Foundations* 11 (2): 302–30.
- 5 We have inserted the term *artist* here as it is in line with the previous paragraphs by Le Corbusier. It is worth noting that Rasmussen and Le Corbusier intersperse the cited texts with *architect* and *artist*, and *architecture* and *art*, as seemingly interchangeable terms (see endnote 1).
- 6 "The claim about appropriate levels of description between brain events and behavior is, of course, not new and rather uncontroversial except for those who are extreme reductionists. The novelty of my proposal is that *disciplined first-person accounts* should be an integral element of the validation of a neurobiological proposal, and not merely coincidental or heuristic information" (Varela 1996, 344, British English spelling in the original).

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